

— ISSUETRAK —

A CEFPI Brief on Educational Facility Issues

Topic: The Harbour School, A Very Special School
Issue Tracker: Yale Stenzler, Educational Facility Planning and Management Consultant
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*Have you seen the beacon light from the lighthouse?
Have you seen the lighthouse?
Have you been inside the lighthouse rotunda?
Have you been met by the four-legged greeters?*

If not, you have not been to The Harbour School.



BACKGROUND

The Harbour School in Baltimore County, Maryland provides a unique and outstanding setting that was designed to enhance and support the programs and services required for 125 special-needs students between the ages of 6 and 21. This private school established as a 501(3)(c) entity provides services to students from several Maryland school systems and other adjacent jurisdictions. The students attend *The Harbour School* because their home school district cannot adequately address the specific needs and requirements, identified in each student's Individualized Educational Program (IEP). The school, which stands as a separate facility, is an essential component in the continuum of services and placement options required for all students and their parents and/or caregivers.

The Harbour School is the most appropriate setting for the students it serves, and is consistent with the *Least Restrictive Environment* requirements and their IEPs. The students come to the school having been diagnosed with such disabilities as Asperger's, autism, emotional disturbances, multiple disabilities, pervasive development disorders, speech and/or language impairments, specific learning disabilities, and traumatic brain injuries. These students usually cannot receive appropriate educational programs and services at their home school or within their home school district. The students are assigned to classes based upon a combination of their chronological age, academic abilities, as well as social and emotional development. A few students are able to return to their home school districts based upon academic and behavioral improvements they make at *The Harbour School*.

Traditionally, school systems have tried to find alternative uses for closed facilities, including potential business or commercial uses. *The Harbour School* process was almost a complete reversal of past strategies. The director of the school, Dr. Linda Jacobs, had previous experience with establishing a school in a commercial building in Annapolis, Maryland, and had also rented space to establish a school in another business park in Baltimore County. She had innovative educational ideas and a unique approach to addressing the needs and requirements of her students. Moving these forward in the facility planning process for a new school while considering the various issues related to the educational environment has led to a school building that effectively serves the students and facilitates teaching and learning.

For many years *The Harbour School*, in Annapolis and the rented space in Baltimore County, had to adapt the program to fit into the existing spaces. Now the school had an opportunity to convert their dreams and desires into a facility that would enhance and support their programs. *The Village Curriculum* could now be fully implemented in the newly designed and constructed facility.

A NEW HOME

Finding *The Harbour School* is easy. When approaching the business park in Owings Mills, Maryland on Dolfeld Boulevard, just look for the beacon of light emanating from the lighthouse, which is the school's symbol.

In looking for a new location for *The Harbour School*, Dr. Jacobs approached a developer, Mr. Leroy Merrit, with a unique proposal. The proposal was to (a) work together to plan, design, and construct a facility to meet all the needs and requirements

of the students, teachers and staff of *The Harbour School*; (b) provide a design that would enable the building to be converted for office or business uses if the school were to leave the site; and, (c) establish a lease-purchase agreement for the school to acquire the building in a fifteen-year period. Although leaving the area was not anticipated, the facility design needed to be flexible to accommodate and allow for an easy conversion to office space or other functions that would be located in the business park.

THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM AND SERVICES

Dr. Linda Jacobs developed the school's unique educational program based upon her years of experience in the field of special education and her extensive involvement with severely disabled students and their families. The educational programs, the curriculum, and the support services that are provided were specifically established to meet the identified needs and requirements of the children and young adults that attend the school.

Students are grouped generally by age into three divisions: lower school, middle school, and high school. Teachers work in teams organized by grade and have one assistant teacher for each class of approximately eight students. Classes often serve fewer than eight students, especially in the lower school. Students may move between teachers within the team for different subjects and students who require one-on-one assistance have their own personal behavioral assistant.

The curriculum, an innovative *Village Curriculum*, is based upon competencies for living independently, functioning as a contributing member of society, obtaining and maintaining a job, and pursuing additional educational and socialization opportunities. Classroom teachers and support staff modified the typical curriculum at each grade level to focus on and incorporate the specific competencies for each student based upon their individual abilities and IEPs.

The instructional program was designed to be offered in spaces that simulate businesses, offices, stores, or shops found in a typical “village” or town. It is within these instructional spaces (classrooms) that the students have practical and simulated learning experiences. The academics are the core of the instructional program, which relates reading, mathematics, science, and social studies to the identified competencies in the several village shops or businesses.

In addition to the teachers, assistant teachers, and one-on-one aides there are clinical psychologists, social workers, speech therapists, reading specialists, an information technology specialist, occupational therapists, and transition specialists. All of these individuals are deeply involved with each student's progress and contribute to the development of each IEP and its implementation in the activities, studies, and experiences of the student.



The instructional technology specialist works with teachers to assist them in developing their computer technology skills and incorporating the use of the computer and technology into the instructional program. All of the students have opportunities to use the computer and the Internet in their classes and to develop the skills that are essential for all students to be successful in the 21st century.

The transition specialists work with students to select and find jobs, a process that begins in the ninth grade. These positions are for a short period of time each week, and typically do not provide financial compensation. As the student progresses there are opportunities (by the time they reach twelfth grade) to obtain a job that is a paid position and/or attend a class at the local community college. These specialists serve as job coaches, make on-site visits, monitor student progress, and assist in the development of student employment skills.

There are also teachers who provide program opportunities in art, music, landscaping, wood shop, physical education, commercial food service, and drama. These areas are integrated into the curriculum and are planned to enhance and support the competencies and IEPs. For example, students in food service activities learn skills for independent living and/or potential employment (selecting foods, following cooking directions, making food, serving food, and working with others). The students prepare food for members of the school staff and students that want to buy a buffet lunch, which is offered about once a week. Students are also called upon to prepare food for small group meetings held at the school. They also bake cakes, cookies, and pies for sale at the school on special occasions.

The school like most other schools in the area offers a sports program that includes basketball, softball, and soccer. Students participate in these sports and compete with other schools in the league. There is also a cheerleading squad to support the school's teams. Similarly, students of all ages and abilities have opportunities to participate in musical and drama presentation at the school for parents and the general public. There are also periodic socials and dances for the high school students, including a prom.

THE DESIGN SOLUTION

Originally the small school in Baltimore County functioned in rented commercial space. The idea of a new school, expanded for additional students, provided a special opportunity. The programs and services required for the increased student population were explored and committed to writing by the director, instructional staff, support personnel, and some parents. The desires and dreams of the director and staff were clearly stated. Prior to the site selection, an architect was engaged to develop the schematic plan for the school. The design with “village” shops and stores met the expressed needs and desires for the school. The design was developed to support and enhance the delivery of the envisioned programs and services, and all design elements and characteristics enhance the overall goal of preparing students for a productive life within the community.

It was during the site selection process that the Owings Mills location was identified and pursued with the landowner, Mr. Leroy Merritt, of Merritt Properties, LLC. Mr. Merritt, a recognized supporter of children and children with special needs, enlisted the skills of Mr. Gary Swatko, Director of Land Development and Construction Services with Merritt to handle the architectural oversight of the new school. Mr. Swatko has had direct involvement with the design, development, and construction of the bulk of the Merritt Properties portfolio, which exceeds 12 million square feet of office and industrial space throughout the Baltimore/Washington market. One of Mr. Merritt's criteria was that the school be designed in a manner that was appropriate and consistent with the balance of the properties located in the Owings Mills business park. They determined that the building would be designed to meet business and/or commercial needs if the school were to close within the fifteen-year lease-purchase period. The potential conversion of the school to a business alternative was a prerequisite for the transaction.



From the exterior, the school looks similar to other commercial real estate properties in the business park. The interior has been developed with a basic double loaded corridor-building plan with a limited number of load-bearing walls. The interior walls could be removed and repositioned to create a variety of office or other business space in the future. The largest space, the gymnasium, could be easily modified for use as a warehouse or for light manufacturing.

Through its shape, size, and color, the entry design provides a feeling of being inside a lighthouse. The school does not have wide corridors that are elaborate or color-coded; they are simple (6 feet wide) circulation areas that have names such as *Beacon Way*, *Harbour Court*, *Lighthouse Lane*, and *Safe Place*. The classrooms are

generally arranged on the outside walls to maximize the use of natural lighting. Instead of assigned classroom numbers for a specific grade, the rooms are named for various businesses and shops that would be found in a typical village. Among the instructional spaces in the school you will find the *Beacon Park at Harbour Yards* (gymnasium), the *Village Wetlands Foundation* (science room), the *Woodin it be Nice* (wood shop), *Lighthouse Broadcasting* (internal broadcasting every morning), *Harbour Lite Cafe* (cooking and food service), and *First Harbour Bank* (mathematics class).

Murals, created by a local artist, depict the functions or specific type of business that takes place within each room. This artwork enriches the streetscape and replaces plain corridors with exciting vistas and information as one travels through the school.

Another special design element that is unique to *The Harbour School* is an alcove in each instructional space. An alcove of 40-48 square feet is provided that is entered through an archway from within the classroom and it has a sliding glass window to the corridor, the interior streets. The window area is about four feet wide and three feet high starting at about four feet from the floor and serves as a display window for student projects and the work that they perform in the specific class. On special occasions students can purchase various items and products either made by the students or sold by them related to the subject in the village shop or business.



A playground is designed and equipped to allow all of the students access to the entire area. It was planned so that students with a wide range of disabilities are able to use the equipment safely and successfully with confidence.

This school has a very warm and inviting feeling that makes students, their parents, the staff, and visitors immediately welcome. It is not a typical institutional setting and the program is supported and enhanced by the care and attention that initiated the original design and the final finishing details. Lucy and Puddin, the two resident cocker spaniels that roam the school and who help provide a homey atmosphere enthusiastically greet all students and visitors.

Note: Through an ambitious fund raising effort the school now owns the building, which was accomplished in less than three years of the fifteen-year lease-purchase period.

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| <p>The Harbour School 11251 Dolfeld Blvd. Owings Mills, MD 21117 (443) 394-3760 www.harbourschool.org</p> | <p><i>Construction started:</i> October 6, 2001 <i>Construction completed:</i> June 15, 2002 <i>Site:</i> 3.5 acres <i>Building Area:</i> 37,000 square feet <i>Cost of Construction:</i> \$ 5,000,000</p> |
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The Council of Educational Facility Planners International prepares *ISSUETRAK* as a service to its membership. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of CEFPI, its officers or members.

CEFPI wishes to thank Yale Stenzler for his valuable time and expertise in preparing this brief.

Yale Stenzler

Prior to retiring in 2003, Dr. Stenzler was the Executive Director for the State of Maryland Public School Construction Program. He is currently providing consultant services in Baltimore City and the District of Columbia. He was not involved as a consultant for *The Harbour School* project; his wife, Nicki, taught in the rented space and the new school building.

To Submit

Please contact Janell Weihs at Janell@cefpi.org with *IssueTrak* articles and ideas. All manuscripts should be submitted electronically in MS Word or rich text format. Final selection of articles rests with the editor and publisher.

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